

CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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CHAPTER 11

The culture of politics

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11.1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, and the virtual demise of left/right ideological commitments as the primary point of reference for international political relations, the idea of 'culture' has emerged as a major candidate for filling much of the conceptual vacuum. It is now frequently used both as the major explanatory category for a host of political and economic developments as well as an important basis on which leaders from a number of non-Western regions have justified certain approaches to politics. This has been reflected very clearly in the contemporary 'Asian values debate' – especially where matters concerning human rights and democracy are at issue. A number of political leaders and academic commentators from the Asia-Pacific region have emphasized what they see as the crucial role played by culture in determining patterns of social, political and economic behaviour. Seen in its most positive light, 'Asian culture' is taken to be basically responsible for the remarkable economic growth, rising standards of living, increased longevity, and low urban crime rates that have characterized development in parts of the region. Thus Singapore's Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, says that correct economic policies are not all that is needed to preserve the living standards now enjoyed in the island state. Continuing success can only be assured by: 'a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hard working people, strong moral values and family ties'. These values, he says, are related directly to 'Asian culture' which 'puts group interest above that of the individual' (Goh, 1994).

The achievements of places like Singapore are usually contrasted with a fairly negative image of the 'West'. The latter is depicted as a cultural or civilizational entity in social and economic decline. Goh Chok Tong's speech in fact spent more time on the apparent decline of the West than it did on the achievements of his own country. Other political leaders in the region such as Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, have also been very vocal in condemning this perceived trend in the West – highlighting drug use, urban crime, single parenthood, divorce, and homosexuality as serious social problems. In turn, these problems have

been linked to Western political practices and institutions which are seen as undermining important values associated with respect and responsibility within the family, and cohesion, harmony and consensus in the broader society. More specifically, social problems in the West have been linked to an 'excess' of democracy which, according to its critics in some parts of Asia, has bred virulent forms of individualism and grasping materialism at the expense of positive community-oriented values and spiritual well-being. A similar exercise in imagery has been carried out by some political elites in the island states of the South Pacific region. This has given rise to an idealized social and political abstraction known as the 'Pacific Way' whose major proponents have frequently condemned Western democracy as inherently unfit for local consumption.

In assessments such as these, entities like 'Asia' and 'the West' are depicted as distinct monolithic blocs, each of which can be characterized according to certain cultural qualities. Although some proponents of the 'Asian values' or 'Pacific Way' theses believe it possible to blend the best aspects of Western and Asian or Pacific traditions, the terms in which the arguments are usually framed imply that 'Western values' are essentially incompatible with 'Asian values' or the 'Pacific Way'. These ideas have been supported by the 'clash of civilizations' thesis put forward in a 1993 article by the well-known US scholar of comparative and international politics, Samuel Huntington, and elaborated in a book-length version in 1996. His basic hypothesis, as set out in the original article, is that the fundamental source of conflict in the future will be cultural. He puts forward the idea of 'civilizational' entities which are defined as the highest cultural groupings of people and 'the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species' (Huntington, 1993, pp.22, 24).

Huntington goes on to identify a variety of broad civilizational groupings, including up to eight mega-groupings comprising Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and 'possibly' African (the people of the Pacific Islands are evidently not numerous enough to count). Any one of these could presumably come into conflict with any other. However, he draws the broadest line of potential conflict – and the most likely – between the West and 'the Rest'. According to Huntington, the main factors which mark the West off from just about any other civilizational entity are found in certain unique cultural concepts: 'Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures' (Huntington, 1993, p.40). Cultural difference in Huntington's scheme also implies cultural determinism. While he notes that cultures can change, and that the nature of their impact on politics can vary, the 'major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures' (Huntington, 1996, p.29).

Huntington's ideas could just as easily have been put forward by any commentator supporting the 'Asian values' thesis, especially in the context of debates about human rights and democracy in the region. These are portrayed as essentially 'Western' ideas and therefore alien to 'Asian cultural values'. It has been suggested, however, that notwithstanding the increasing regularity with which the pan-Asian vision is being recited by some political leaders around the region, and which may seem to lend credence to Huntington's ideas, the crude culturalist argument that is put forward is 'both anthropologically naïve and politically paranoid' (Wright-Neville, 1995, p.4). This raises questions concerned not only with the relationship between culture and politics, but with the whole issue of cultural relativism. In addition, one of the most interesting questions of all that emerges is: what is 'the West'?

This last question is especially important when thinking about the place of countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA in the Asia-Pacific region. Although they are certainly part of the broad geographic region, many would argue that their predominantly European cultural and political heritage places them in a quite different category from, say, the countries of other regional areas such as South-East Asia or the south-west Pacific. This is certainly the line taken by Prime Minister Mahathir in various dealings with Australia, and is reflected as well in his desire to exclude 'culturally non-Asian' countries from certain regional organizations such as the proposed East Asian Economic Caucus. But the implications of 'anti-Westernism' extend beyond the region as well and have the potential to seriously affect other relations. For example, in 1994 Mahathir became involved in a serious trade dispute with the UK following allegations in the British press of corruption surrounding a defence contract and British aid for the construction of a dam in Malaysia. Apart from placing a ban on the awarding of government contracts to British businesses, Mahathir engaged in some inverted racist flourishes which drew on historic images of British colonial racism. He stated that Malaysians must, quite obviously, be corrupt 'because they are not British and not white' (quoted in Lawson, 1996a, p.122).

Such attitudes have been further encouraged by the eruption in Australia of the 'Pauline Hanson phenomenon' following the election of a renegade Liberal Party member to the Federal Parliament in 1996 who has since campaigned against further Asian immigration into Australia (as well as for major cuts in spending on programmes for Australian Aborigines). With the infamous 'White Australia policy' less than 30 years in the past and the current Prime Minister, John Howard, showing very weak leadership against Ms Hanson's position, Australia's image in the region has been badly tarnished despite concerted official efforts over the last few decades to promote a firm social basis for multiculturalism. The irony is that Ms Hanson has, like proponents of the Asian values thesis themselves and more sophisticated commentators like Huntington, focused much attention on alleged cultural differences between Asians and 'mainstream' Australians to justify her position.

In approaching all these issues we must start with the idea of culture itself, especially since some of the most important political questions derive from how culture is conceptualized in the first place. We then examine some aspects of the relationship between culture and the state in the Asian region, paying particular attention to how culture is understood in terms of national identity. Finally, we look more closely at the key features of the 'Asian values' debate and its implications for contemporary concerns about democracy and human rights. Although some reference will be made to similar issues in the island states of the South Pacific, it is not possible to deal as comprehensively with this part of the broad region simply for reasons of space. With respect to the conceptual aspects of the discussion, it should also be noted at the start that no firm answers to such questions as 'what is culture?' and 'what role does it play in political life?' will be provided. Indeed, one of the points of this chapter is to emphasize the virtual unanswerability of such questions. This is a valuable lesson in itself, especially if it increases the level of uncertainty about the extent to which we can ever assign cause and effect by reference to 'culture' in the study of politics.

11.2 The idea of culture

The idea of culture has a long and complex history, but we must confine ourselves to aspects of its conceptualization that are directly relevant to the issues outlined above. The best starting point is a particular perspective on culture developed largely within the discipline of anthropology. This perspective placed almost all matters concerning socio-political values, beliefs, practices and institutions within the framework of an over-arching conception of culture first put forward in 1871: 'Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Edward Tylor reproduced in Applebaum, 1987, p.37). Following this early influential definition, culture was usually thought of as referring to the entire way of life of a human community, rather than to one or other of its attributes. One major problem with using 'culture' to denote a distinct (but abstract) totality is that definitions of the totality itself – of the culture – inevitably tend to emphasize the idea of difference between so-called cultures, rather than any qualities that they may have in common (Firth quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963, p.269). In addition, some perspectives hold that people 'behave differently as adults because their cultures are different'. It has also been argued that people are not only 'born into different habitual ways of life', but that they are destined to follow these ways 'because they have no choice' (Davis and Dollard quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963, p.91).

Let us consider several major problems which emerge from these ideas about culture. First, conceptions which focus only on difference between

groups invariably gloss over contradictions that may arise within groups. As societies have become increasingly diverse because of human population movements – a phenomenon that has become particularly widespread in the twentieth century – it is scarcely possible to speak any longer of discrete cultural groups living in discrete geographical spaces. Despite these obvious problems, many social scientists have continued to write as though cultures were clearly delineated entities with distinct boundaries. One scholar has recently pointed out that there has been a strong tendency among anthropologists to treat cultural groups (other than one's own) as if they were 'distinctive communities somehow set apart from modern history'. The same scholar also takes issue with other social scientists (mainly political scientists) who have used distorting top-down formulations in their treatment of culture that focus on the power of the state and formal institutions (Warren, 1993, pp.1, 4). Arguably, these sort of perspectives ignore the mass of people 'at the bottom' and hear authoritative expressions of culture only from those who have the power to make themselves heard, that is, from elites.

The second major problem is that the behaviour of either whole groups, or individuals within a group, is seen as more or less fixed in an overall cultural pattern that has been inherited from previous generations, will be lived out by the present generation, and passed on more or less intact to the next one. The most simplistic view would hold that people born into, say, an autocratic 'Confucian society', will so thoroughly absorb the 'Confucian value system' that they will forever live according to a certain scheme of filial piety, automatically accept their allotted sphere and duties in the family, pay due respect to their superiors outside the family, and generally obey political authorities without question, thereby playing their proper part in maintaining social stability, harmony and order. The overall result (at least according to this stereotyped view of Confucian society), must be a very static social order that reproduces itself without significant change generation after generation. However, nobody who is even marginally acquainted with the political and social history of countries in the so-called East Asian 'Confucian culture area' could seriously subscribe to such a view.

A third important issue is the extent to which culture may be equated with a value system. Another significant development in anthropological thought earlier this century has been extremely influential in shaping the way social scientists have approached this particular issue. The concept of a unique bounded culture inevitably gives rise to the view that such 'a culture' possesses its own unique frame of reference for all moral values – of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Anthropology has long been imbued with the idea that different cultural groups and their moral codes should not be ranked in some kind of hierarchy, but treated with equal respect and judged only in terms of their own moral precepts and standards (rather than those of 'outsiders'). Thus the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism, in summary, held that 'there is an irreducible diversity among cultures because each culture is a unique whole with parts so intertwined that none of them can be

understood or evaluated without reference to the other parts and to the cultural whole, the so-called pattern of culture'. It follows that: 'Ethics, as part of a culture, cannot be understood or evaluated apart from the distinct world of the society to which it belongs' (Ladd, 1973, pp.2-3). It should be mentioned that the original doctrine of cultural relativism was extremely useful in opposing racism and acting as an antidote for chauvinistic forms of ethnocentrism. In relation to morality, however, the doctrine has posed some important problems for such issues as human rights because cultural relativism clearly implies ethical relativism, and it is this problem that underscores much of the contemporary debate about 'Asian values'.

Before leaving the general topic of culture and its treatment in social scientific thought, we should also look briefly at the concept of 'political culture'. This concept emerged within the discipline of political science (although it was influenced by anthropology as well), and has been quite influential in shaping perspectives on the relationship between culture and politics. It was originally used as a concept for addressing the problem of developing a 'democratic political culture' within societies at large. The impetus for this task was initially provided by the experience of Europe in the first part of the twentieth century which showed quite clearly that Western states were hardly invulnerable to doctrines such as fascism. Following the original formulation of ideas, however, the concerns of the political culture school were extended to political development in the 'new nations' of the decolonizing Third World.

The working definition of 'the political culture of a nation' adopted by its early proponents was 'the particular distribution of patterns of orientation towards political objects among members of the nation' (Almond and Verba [1965] 1989, p.13). This was not very different from previous studies in 'national character'. The latter concept had been taken to refer to relatively enduring personality characteristics and patterns of behaviour that predominated among the adult members of a given society. Although studies in both national character and political culture recognized that individual attitudes varied within a given national population, and that there were often significant sub-cultures, both were none the less based on the idea that the boundary of a political culture coincided with a larger political system, and in most cases this was the state. It followed that the entities in possession of a political culture were, in fact, states.

A major problem with the use of the political culture concept, at least in this way, is that it has lent itself to deterministic perspectives. A prime example is a major monograph on power and politics in Asia, the opening lines of which claim that:

Throughout Asia today the drama of politics is being played out by leaders and followers whose roles are largely prescribed by culturally determined concepts about the nature of power ... Briefly put, my thesis is that political power is extraordinarily sensitive to cultural nuances, and that, therefore, cultural variations are decisive in determining the course of political development.

(Pye, 1985, p.vii)

To summarize briefly, the general discussion in this section has aimed to raise the level of critical awareness about the complexity of issues surrounding conceptions of culture in general, and the relationship between culture and politics in particular. Special attention has been drawn to difficulties with earlier anthropological ideas about culture and the implications of these for cultural determinism and relativism – although I should add that anthropologists today do not necessarily endorse such ideas. At the very least, I hope this section has unsettled some of the more commonly accepted ideas about culture and its role in politics. What I have not done, of course, is provide anything resembling a definite answer to such questions as what culture actually is, and what role it might play in shaping political life. As suggested in the introduction, one purpose of the discussion has been to demonstrate just how problematic such questions are. This is important for approaching the next section in which we look more closely at how the idea of culture is implicated in perceptions of state and nation in the Asian region, and how these perceptions in turn influence ideas about political legitimacy and authority.

11.3 Culture and the state

In light of the issues introduced above, we shall now consider the nature of the modern sovereign state and its relationship to 'culture', especially since the state is another entity that is often depicted as some kind of totality with distinct boundaries. At the simplest level, states are legal/political units and few would argue with the proposition that they do in fact possess relatively clear – although by no means permanent – territorial boundaries. Each state (of which there are now close to 200 in the world) bears a distinctive name to denote the territory claimed as its sovereign space. Leaving aside questions concerning the artificiality of many territorial boundaries, especially those drawn by colonial powers, this seems fairly straightforward. What is more problematic is that each state is meant to encompass not simply a physical territory, but a 'nation' as well. This is clearly expressed in the widely used misnomer 'nation-state'. Keeping in mind that 'nation' is commonly defined in terms of a people who share a common, unique, cultural heritage, let us now very briefly consider the idea of a 'Chinese nation' and a 'Chinese culture'. Does the legal-territorial state of China encompass a single Chinese nation which is in possession of a single, coherent, homogeneous Chinese culture? And is such a culture sufficiently unique that it is clearly distinct from say, 'Korean culture', 'Thai culture', 'Singaporean culture', 'Indonesian culture', 'Papua New Guinea culture' and so on? Is there, in fact, any such thing as a uniform and unique 'national culture' in any of these places? And if so, on what exactly is it based?

The set of cases in which the boundaries of a state coincide more or less exactly with those of an identifiable ethnic or cultural group is extremely small. Indeed, it has been suggested that there is but one genuine case in

the entire world – Iceland. The very idea of a ‘national culture’ is therefore highly problematic, and not just in the most obvious places like Papua New Guinea where around 800 different languages are spoken. But although most observers would admit that there are almost no states in the world whose borders contain a single ‘nation’ in possession of a unique and homogeneous culture, there is still a strong tendency, going back decades in disciplines such as international relations, to treat states more or less in this way, or at least to gloss over differences at the sub-national level as relatively unimportant. This has been supported to some extent by the work of the political culture school. As we have seen, although political culture theory has recognized that states may contain sub-cultures and minority groups, the theory has none the less tended to treat the state as the primary receptacle of a culture.

Another good example of this kind of thinking is evident in the work of the anthropologist, Ruth Benedict. Her well-known study, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, is about ‘what makes Japan a nation of Japanese’ (Benedict [1954] 1994, p.13). I have suggested already that the idea that any state possesses some kind of identifiable ‘national character’ is simplistic to say the least – even in the case of Japan which appears to be relatively homogeneous. Simplistic ideas, however, especially in politics, are often among the most appealing, influential and powerful. We should therefore resist the temptation to think in terms of ‘national cultures’ which are bounded by lines on the map of states, and to consider instead the idea of intra-state cultural pluralism. In other words, we should consider differences, not so much between countries, as within them.

Japan is certainly *comparatively* homogeneous, especially *vis-à-vis* most other countries in the region. Indeed, it is widely regarded as one of the most homogeneous countries in the world. But the emphasis on the ‘comparative’ is very important because even in this instance, cultural homogeneity cannot be simply assumed. Apart from the fact that Japan is home to the indigenous Ainu people and to resident minorities from other countries in the region, the linguistic record in Japan indicates a cultural diversity among ‘mainstream’ Japanese that has not often been acknowledged. Japanese dialects, for instance, differ from each other even more than European languages such as Spanish and Italian, and ‘standard Japanese’ (a Tokyo dialect) did not emerge as the lingua franca until this century (Morton, 1996, p.52). This underscores the fact that the degree of cultural homogeneity evident today is of fairly recent origin. One writer points out that the use of the word *bunka* – as in the phrase *Nihon bunka* (Japanese culture) – is itself really very modern and did not make much impression on popular consciousness until about the 1920s (Morris-Suzuki, 1995, p.761).

More generally, it has also been pointed out that there is more than one Japan. Like virtually any other place in the world, Japan is a contested site and the ‘various groups that make up its citizenry agree only in the most general terms on what constitutes its cultural, social, and political

practices'. It is interesting to note, however, that both Western commentators and Japanese chroniclers have, at least until recently, tended to emphasize continuity and homogeneity over change and diversity, with an emphasis on what are assumed to be 'fundamental constants underlying Japanese culture and history' (Morton, 1996, pp.50-1, 72). The stereotyped views that many outsiders have of 'Japanese culture', and which have often been promoted within Japan by conservative groups as well, have therefore contributed to reducing the complexity of Japan to a uni-dimensional singularity in the name of a 'national culture'.

Another example of a relatively homogeneous country is the South Pacific island state of Tonga. But the question of cultural identity in Tonga is interesting from another point of view, and that concerns the extent to which 'traditional culture', even if it is almost totally homogeneous in some respects, must be decisive in determining political forms. Tonga has one of the most conservative political systems in the region. It is ruled by a monarch who presides over a parliament consisting largely of his own appointees and representatives of an hereditary aristocracy, while members elected by the people are in the minority. According to its supporters, the legitimacy of the present system is anchored in a body of traditional Tongan culture that goes back at least a thousand years. This system, however, has been under attack in recent years from a local pro-democracy movement which is seeking extensive institutional changes to ensure greater accountability and responsiveness. For this movement, the fact that the existing system is 'traditional' is not accepted as a bar to change and reform. Other critics point out that many elements of the present system have, in any case, been introduced via British influences and it is therefore inauthentic anyway. Questions of authenticity aside, the local pro-democracy movement refuses to accept that 'Tongan culture', as interpreted by the entrenched elites, will forever determine that ordinary Tongans must remain in a position of political subordination to an hereditary class of rulers (see Lawson, 1996b).

Another point worth emphasizing is that where expressions of national culture or shared national values occur in a political context, these are very often tied to issues involving political legitimacy. In Thailand, for example, the state religion of Buddhism constitutes 'a powerful element of both nationalist rhetoric and of social and political control', although this has not gone unchallenged by sects contesting official religious interpretations (Hewison, 1993, p.180). In the case of Vietnam, it has been pointed out that Ho Chi Minh successfully used selected aspects of Vietnamese history, tradition and culture to fortify the goals of national liberation and building socialism, as well as the historic and moral leadership role that the Vietnamese Communist Party had played in realizing them (Alagappa, 1995a, p.314). In other words, a unified vision of Vietnamese history, tradition and culture was used to serve the political purpose of rallying support for certain goals. That this has been largely successful is in spite of an actual diversity of experiences within Vietnam. As Vasavakul points out in her analysis of political legitimacy in socialist Vietnam:

there is no single Vietnamese tradition, no single Vietnamese people, and no single Vietnamese peasantry: Vietnamese 'traditional' values vary from region to region, even from village to village ... the concept of 'Vietnamese tradition' itself may be a construct created by power holders to legitimize their control of political authority.

(Vasavakul, 1995, p.260)

Cultural diversity is much more visible in most other countries in the Asia-Pacific. This is a result not only of the presence of settler populations – usually from other parts of the region – but also because the territorial boundaries of modern states generally encompass more than one distinctive indigenous ethnic or cultural group. Such diversity unquestionably lies behind the strong emphasis placed on 'nation-building' by post-colonial regimes in many places. In turn, this has often resulted in the imaginative construction of official national unifying ideologies which seek to instil a common national ethos among their diverse citizenries. Historically, the perceived or alleged need for strong national unity has been further reinforced by Cold War fears – real, imagined or deliberately manufactured – relating to external threats and internal subversion. The three South-East Asian states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore provide good examples of this and we shall therefore look at these in a little more detail.

Perhaps the best-known example of a national unifying ideology is Indonesia's official state philosophy of Pancasila. This philosophy is meant to unite a highly diverse population in common loyalty to the post-independent state bequeathed by Dutch colonialism. The diversity of the people populating the archipelago may be illustrated by reference to Indonesia's ethnic and linguistic pluralism. In addition to the largest ethnic group, the Javanese, who comprise almost half of Indonesia's total population of about 165 million, there are several lesser, but still significant groups such as the Acehnese, Bataks and Minangkabaus in Sumatra, the Sundanese in West Java, the Balinese, the Bugis and Makassar of southern Sulawesi, not to mention hundreds of other smaller groups as well as ethnic Chinese. This diversity is further complicated by a significant level of religious pluralism for although almost 90 per cent of the population is officially designated as Muslim, some of the groups receiving this designation practice highly syncretized forms which almost constitute distinct religions in their own right. And this additional dimension works to pluralize the Javanese as well, a group which might otherwise appear to be monolithic (Liddle, 1996, p.65).

Over the decades since independence, Pancasila has been rigidly institutionalized in an effort to rally this diverse population around a common set of principles. The Sanskrit word means literally 'five principles', and each of these are highly abstract: belief in God; Indonesian unity; humanitarianism; democracy; and social justice. Since 1985, all social and political organizations have been required to adopt Pancasila as their sole philosophical base. Furthermore, the denial or repudiation of Pancasila by any individual citizen is regarded as seditious. At the same time, however, cultural diversity within the state is explicitly acknowledged and reflected in the official state motto: Unity in Diversity.

But the degree to which expressions of 'cultural diversity' are permitted, especially if these were to become manifest in political activity, is obviously limited by the requirements of a 'national interest' which seeks to impose a high degree of political uniformity and obedience to the ruling party. One commentator reports that both President Sukarno and President Suharto have 'used it as an ideological weapon to delimit the boundaries of acceptable political contestation' (Liddle, 1996, p.79). So while a certain level of pluralism in 'harmless' cultural activities and practices is accepted, political pluralism is regarded as a challenge to the legitimacy of the government and a threat to the state itself.

Indonesia's close neighbours, Singapore and Malaysia, have also adopted national ideologies, although they have not been as rigidly institutionalized. There are also important contextual differences which have shaped their official expression. For one thing, the ideologies are based either explicitly or implicitly on the culture of certain dominant groups, namely the Malays in Malaysia and the Chinese in Singapore – or at least on what is assumed to be 'the culture' of these groups. In Malaysia, organized official efforts to propagate a National Cultural Policy (NCP) may be traced to a government-sponsored congress in 1971 that adopted three basic principles through which the policy was to be defined. First, it was to be based on the 'indigenous culture' of the region (that is, Malay culture); second, as a slight moderation of the first principle, suitable elements from other cultures were to be accepted; and third, to again reinforce the first principle, Islam was to be recognized as an important component. The emphasis on Malay culture and language and the religion of Islam may be seen as reflecting the determination of Malay political leaders to retain a paramount position over the large population of non-Malays. The latter is comprised largely of ethnic Chinese who number around 30 per cent of the population, as well as South Asians and some other minorities. One problem with the Malay emphasis is that it has reinforced very strongly the sense of second-class citizenship experienced by non-Malay citizens (Crouch, 1996, p.166).

The Singaporean context is different again. Here, ethnic Chinese comprise about 75 per cent of the citizenry with Malays and South Asians making up most of the remainder. Given the numerical, political, economic and social predominance of the ethnic Chinese, it is therefore not very surprising that Singapore's 'core national values' are often described in cultural terms as essentially Confucian. After all, Confucianism is Chinese (although, as we have seen, it is also often used to characterize a broader East Asian cultural area consisting of the two Koreas, Japan, and Taiwan as well as China). Singapore's 'Chineseness' – and the Confucianism that is often thought to accompany it automatically – is thus sometimes regarded as an interesting anomaly in an otherwise Malay-dominated sub-region of South-East Asia. But membership of the category 'ethnic Chinese' does not mean that one is automatically endowed with a Confucian world-view. In the case of Singapore's Chinese population it has been pointed out that, as an immigrant population drawn

largely from displaced peasantry of southern China, the understanding of Confucianism that most Singaporean Chinese brought with them was, at best, a limited and 'distilled folk version'. Furthermore, the best educated among these immigrants were more likely to be influenced by the 'modernist' movements in post-1900 China 'in which Confucianism was ridiculed and rejected rather than followed' (Chua, 1995, pp.28-9).

The most important question, however, is not so much whether Singapore really is a 'Confucian society', but why an official programme of Confucianization was pursued by the government. What this means for the politics of culture and identity not only in Singapore, but in the wider region, represents one of the most interesting stories of the contemporary 'Asian values' debate. Indeed, the Singaporean political elite is often regarded as having instigated the original debate as far back as the 1970s. We shall next explore this historical development in terms of a phenomenon which has become known over the past two decades as the 'invention of tradition'. In relation to this, it should be noted that all traditions are 'invented' in the sense that they are socially constructed rather than naturally occurring phenomena, but the phrase has been used more specifically in recent years to denote a conscious exercise in construction that is deliberately designed to achieve certain social, economic or political ends.

As with Indonesia and Malaysia, the prime mover in the promulgation of national core values in Singapore has been the government. And, like its neighbours, Singapore has been dominated by a single government for decades – the People's Action Party (PAP) having been in power since 1959. In the earlier years of its rule, the PAP under Lee Kwan Yew instituted a programme of rapid economic development and modernization, and the relatively high standards of living now enjoyed by the majority of Singaporeans is testimony to the government's undoubted success in the economic sphere. At the same time, the government has made various attempts to reorient the 'values' of its population. At first this meant the repudiation of certain 'traditional' attitudes which might impede modern developmental objectives. By the mid 1970s, however, there was a change in thinking, and a new kind of rhetoric about the value of certain traditional values, especially 'Confucian values', began to emerge. By the late 1970s, more concerted efforts were being made to promote the 'cultural health' of the ethnic Chinese population through a 'speak more Mandarin' campaign. This language (which was spoken as a first language by fewer than 1 per cent of the ethnic Chinese population) was thought more appropriate for instilling a stronger sense of traditional 'Chineseness' and Confucian values than was the case with the more commonly spoken dialects of Hokkein, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese and Hakka. Mandarin was also thought to constitute a stronger buffer against the allegedly corrosive influence of the West.

These efforts were supplemented in the early 1980s by a new educational programme which involved the establishment of an Institute of East Asian Philosophies (IEAP). Its main official purpose was to promote

the understanding of Confucian philosophy, especially among ethnic Chinese. The secondary school curriculum was also modified to make room for courses on religious knowledge and Confucian ethics. This was a direct response to Prime Minister Lee's concern about 'Westernization' and the need to strengthen traditional Asian virtues and values in school programmes. The religious education school programme, however, was later abandoned due to its apparent role in increasing religious tensions between various groups. In addition, the rhetoric associated with Confucianism has been modified over the years because of its exclusion of the non-Chinese sectors of the population. The IEAP itself was not actually dissolved, but transformed into an institute concerned with the study of the East Asian 'economic miracle' – although this miracle is, at least rhetorically, also now associated with Confucianism (see Khong, 1995, p.125).

Two interesting points emerge from this story. First, whereas 'Confucianism' was previously held responsible for economic stagnation, it is now being credited with predisposing societies to high levels of growth and development. This in itself should make us more wary of ideas about cultural determinism. Second, and as already mentioned, Singaporean Chinese have never had a particularly strong Confucian tradition, and to say that Singapore is 'traditionally' a Confucian society is very misleading. Also, up until the 1970s the government had, in the name of rational, modern economic development, done its best to eradicate whatever elements of 'Chinese tradition' had persisted to that time. The government's subsequent selection and promotion of the Confucian tradition – which of course is but one of a number of 'Chinese traditions' – therefore constitutes a classic case of the 'invention of tradition' for political purposes. As one commentator has wryly noted: 'The Confucian campaign was instituted by the ruling elite not because the citizenry was seeking a deeper understanding of its heritage, but rather because the leadership wanted to establish a set of cultural values it believed would further its policies' (Khong, 1995, p.125).

The more recent moderation of explicit Confucianization in Singapore, however, does not mean that the government has abandoned its efforts to inculcate certain social and political values in specific opposition to so-called Western values. Rather, it has become much more common to hear of a vaguely defined set of national 'core values'. Not surprisingly, these are very similar to what are promoted more generally in the region as 'Asian values'. In 1989, the Singaporean President, Wee Kim Wee, began an officially sponsored debate 'on national ideology' by announcing what its core values were to be: placing society above self; upholding the family as the basic building block of society; resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention; and stressing religious tolerance and harmony. These are scarcely different from the original set of values originally designated as 'Confucian'. The stress on community before self, and the importance of the family are much the same, and the ideas of consensus and harmony in the political and social

spheres are the precise outcomes associated with obedience and duty in the Confucian scheme. On the announcement of the 'core values', the concerns previously voiced by the non-Chinese sectors were by no means put to rest. Said one Malay MP – from the PAP itself – the 'inherent nature of a national ideology and the heterogeneity of our society begs the question: whose values do we adopt?' (reported in Balakrishnan, 1989, p.37). In a society marked by a high degree of cultural diversity, this is indeed an important question to ask.

I have so far concentrated on 'deconstructing' some of the states in the region in order to demonstrate that it is almost impossible to find a case where a single culture is shared by all people within the borders of a state. I have also been concerned to show that expressions of 'national culture' are often carefully engineered and imposed from above – that is, by political elites – for clearly instrumental purposes. This does not mean, however, that 'the state' has failed to provide a focus of loyalty for numerous of its citizens, nor does it mean that nationalism has failed to make its mark as a significant force in the region. Far from it. The case of Japan in the late 1930s and 1940s stands as a prime example of just how powerful a force nationalism driven by the state can be.

Some have argued that (the experience of Japan excepted) nationalism in Asia has generally been a positive force: 'for peoples long victimized by colonialism, such sentiments mean empowerment, freedom and an assertion of national dignity'. Nationalism, according to this view, has therefore been 'an invaluable catalyst' for post-independence nation-building with Asian leaders over the past 50 years having unified and mobilized their 'freshly liberated peoples by reminding them of their traditional cultural or ethnic strengths' (*Asiaweek*, 9 February 1996, pp.22–3).

There is, however, much more to nationalism than this. As suggested earlier, a broad sense of nationalism has also worked to suppress many of the smaller cultural traditions and ethnic groups. And the rise of new nation-states in places like Indonesia, as well as the transformation of older ones such as Vietnam and Thailand, has put local cultural practices under considerable pressure:

Right from the start, nationalists turned to traditional forms of cultural communication in order to spread their ideas, and once the new nation-states were established, they began to demand greater cultural orthodoxy to reinforce state identity. These demands of orthodoxy fell hard on ethnic minorities whose cultures were valued less than those of the dominant centre ... Even where minority and majority cultures are preserved in institutes of national culture, the vitality of these cultures has been stifled.

(Mackerras, 1995, p.520)

So far from nationalism necessarily being a positive expression of a country's national cultural integrity or pride, it may well entail one group's domination over other smaller and weaker groups.

We turn next to the debate about 'Asian values', especially as this concerns such issues as democracy and human rights. As we shall see,

certain ideas of 'Asian democracy' and an 'Asian' interpretation of human rights have been put forward by a number of political leaders in the region. A broad notion of Asian identity, connected firmly to some kind of cultural base, is of course essential to these ideas in that it serves as an important point of reference and legitimation for whatever model or account of democracy and/or human rights is put forward. Formulations of this kind have much in common with nationalist constructions of identity and so the kind of 'regionalism' evident in the process of conceptualizing an Asian identity in order to authenticate, for example, a specifically Asian model of democracy, may be seen as an extension of the nationalist device (see Lawson, 1996a, p.116).

11.4 The Asian values debate

Singapore's 'shared values' idea has provided a substantial basis for the wider Asian values debate. Indeed, the latter is in many ways simply a projection of the Singaporean debate onto the regional and international stages, and echoed with only slight variations by some other political leaders in the region. Moreover, the values which are promoted as 'Asian' and said to be shared widely across the region are still basically constructed from selected elements of the Confucian value system. One writer suggests that Lee Kwan Yew simply changed the name of his discourse from 'Confucian' to 'Asian', without really changing its substance because the former term was too restrictive. 'Asia', on the other hand, was an 'empty term' waiting to be filled (Callahan, 1996, p.10).

The general idea of Asian values has also allowed some authoritarian leaders to put forward a model of government called 'Asian democracy' as an alternative to 'Western democracy'. There is not the space to dwell at length on the details of this model (and in fact these details are not really discussed in much depth by its proponents) but the main features of 'Asian democracy' are usually set out primarily in contrast with Western forms. So while 'Western democracy' is characterized as based on dissensus, conflict, disunity and individualism, 'Asian democracy' is evidently imbued with such values as consensus, harmony, unity and community before self. When formulated in this way, the latter set of values may appear quite admirable and desirable, while the former appear to be just the opposite. But to accept these characterizations at face value is to yield too readily to the simplicity of the scheme. Any student of politics with even a modicum of insight into such ideologies as fascism, for example, can readily recall that ideas of harmony, consensus and unity, when harnessed to doctrines of organic statism under strong leadership, can produce quite abhorrent political consequences.

Given the relatively authoritarian perspectives of the proponents of 'Asian democracy', it is also unsurprising that civil and political rights are given a low priority in the model. This means significant limitations on the right of political oppositions to organize – indeed, on the right to oppose

the government at all. At the same time, authoritarian leaders generally say that they give priority to social, cultural and economic rights. In contrast, the West is depicted as being concerned essentially with political and civil rights, which is taken to reflect individualistic approaches to rights in general. Both approaches are linked, respectively, to 'Western culture' or 'Asian culture'. As with some of the constructions considered earlier, the simplicity of the scheme is certainly appealing.

Another perspective on these issues is linked more explicitly to the international political context. Referring to the Bangkok Regional Preparatory meeting which preceded the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, one report said that: 'Human rights were no longer dismissed as a tool of foreign oppression but were promoted as a means of asserting Asian distinctiveness from Western dominated norms of social and political order'. To illustrate this point, it was noted that 'the weight China gives to certain rights, such as the right to subsistence over political and civil rights, demonstrates that vast differences remain between Chinese interpretations of international human rights documents and Western interpretations'. The report went on to suggest that even though 'the voices of Asian citizens are obstructed by the political control of the state', there might yet be 'a distinction rooted in Asian culture between some Western and some Asian cultural views of human beings' (see Bauer, 1995, pp.1-2). These views, however, are not necessarily – or even usually – shared by many non-governmental organization representatives from the Asian region. Indeed the NGO community generally is far more likely to reject culturalist positions and embrace more universalist approaches to human rights.

NGOs have become more influential in recent years and are now more likely to gain media attention as well. However, those with the power to make themselves heard most effectively are, as mentioned earlier, unquestionably those with the most political power. In this context, it is also interesting to note that there is at least one level at which a certain coherence does operate within the region in terms of culture, and that is at the level of political elites. In other words, one can identify certain 'cultural' commonalities among those promoting ideas such as 'Asian values' and the 'Pacific Way' in terms of an elite, regional political culture. Ironically, the elites participating in this regional culture are usually among the most 'Westernized' in terms of the language they use (English), educational background, life-style and income bracket. One well known critic of the Pacific Way has noted the extent to which this label denotes a 'club' for political elites operating through a number of Pacific Island institutions and bureaucracies. He argues that the Pacific Island elites themselves have become increasingly homogenized as a distinct class in their own right. This has come about largely through the adoption of Western life-styles at the expense of their own local cultures. Moreover, it has distanced them significantly from the ordinary people of the region (Hau'ofa cited in Lawson 1996b, pp.4-5). It is therefore seen as the height of hypocrisy for elites to resist demands for more democratic participation

by appealing to the concept of indigenous cultural traditions which they themselves have largely abandoned.

There are some other obvious informal cross-national or transnational 'communities' that have emerged in the last decade or so, and which could also be described as having gone some way towards developing a certain culture among themselves. These include NGO communities, many of which have formed around common concerns and have often adopted a common (although not identical) approach to issues such as human rights and the environment. There are also powerful business communities. These sometimes have close links with governments but they are not necessarily synonymous with them. The increasing transnationalism of big companies also contributes to the process of building a certain cohesion into some business groups which transcends ethnic or national identities. More detailed discussions of business and economics must be left to other books in this series, but it is important to keep in mind that the development of certain patterns of behaviour and beliefs around business communities and their practices constitutes yet another aspect of culture, and further complicates contemporary issues concerning culture and politics in the region.

In summary, while it must certainly be acknowledged that 'cultural differences' do in fact exist and may be discerned across a considerable range of social, political and economic practices, we should maintain a critical perspective on all situations where the idea of culture is invoked. Certainly, much care must be taken in ascribing cause and effect where culture and politics is concerned. And as much care should be taken in identifying exactly what the unit or group is that is said to possess 'a culture'. For example, whereas the original formulation of the cultural relativist doctrine was in relation to the small-scale societies on which anthropologists usually focused, the frame of reference claimed by proponents of 'Asian democracy' or 'Asian human rights' is of course the whole entity known as 'Asia'. But since there is no single cultural tradition that can be said to apply to the whole of Asia, then there is no framework for a cultural relativist claim about 'Asian' democracy or human rights. Moreover, doctrines of cultural determinism are even less plausible in the context of the Asian values/democracy debate. For example, if 'Asian culture' is inherently incompatible with, or contrary to, the kinds of values that support democratic politics, then how is the record of democracy in many parts of Asia to be explained? This is best addressed via a brief review of the enormous variety of governmental forms found throughout the region which range from liberal democracies through to strong authoritarian regimes.

Japan has maintained a democratic form of government for half a century, even though it was imposed from outside on a conservative society with few apparent liberal elements of its own. More recently, South Korea and Taiwan have each repudiated authoritarianism even though authoritarian government had brought high levels of economic growth and a concomitant increase in standards of living. The cases of Japan,

Korea and Taiwan are especially noteworthy in light of some of the claims made about 'Confucian culture' and its apparently negative consequences for liberal political development, for in all three Confucianism is said to constitute an important and influential tradition – although again, it is not the only tradition in these places. Thailand's political history has certainly been volatile, but support for democracy under a constitutional monarchy is clearly stronger than any form of authoritarianism – especially that of a military regime. In Burma/Myanmar too there is little doubt that the preferences of ordinary people, if given free expression, would be for the pro-democratic (and previously democratically elected) leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, rather than the repressive State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In the Philippines there is strong support for constitutional government, especially after the experience of the Marcos years, even though democracy by itself is clearly not a simple panacea that is going to miraculously resolve the country's enormous social and economic problems.

If one is to make any broad statements about politics and government in the Asian region at all, then, it can only be in terms which stress considerable variety in political regime types. From the most repressive



Burmese opposition leader and chief of the National League for Democracy party, Aung San Suu Kyi, Rangoon, May 1996

regimes such as those of Burma and China (especially in the latter's rule over Tibet), to what is effectively an absolute monarchy in Brunei, to 'softer' forms of authoritarianism in places like Malaysia, to newly emergent democratic governance in South Korea and Taiwan, and to relatively long-standing democratic regimes in India and Japan, the Asian region displays an enormous range of political diversity which defies any attempt to reduce politics in the region to any one category. This is also just one of the reasons why it is impossible to leap to any firm conclusions about the relationship between politics and culture, especially in terms of the extent to which something called, say, 'Korean culture' let alone 'Asian culture', actually determines political behaviour and institutions.

One of the most useful general commentaries on these issues has been provided by Korea's long-time pro-democracy campaigner, Kim Dae Jung. First, Kim points out that doubts about the applicability of democracy in Asia have been raised mainly by the region's authoritarian leaders, and that most of their arguments about Asian culture and values are simply self-serving. Second, although he agrees that simply foisting alien systems of government indiscriminately on different societies cannot work, the more significant question is whether democracy is a system that really is so alien that it cannot work in the region. He further questions whether democracy has in fact been given much of a chance in places like Singapore at all, given the 'absolute intolerance of dissent' displayed by leaders there. Kim also argues that one can find significant elements of thought in philosophies around the region, including strands of Confucianism, Buddhism and the native Korean religion of Tonghak, that are as profoundly democratic as any of those of the West. Most importantly, however, he suggests that perhaps too much can be made of cultural factors. While undoubtedly important, culture alone does not determine the fate of a society, nor is it immutable. The biggest obstacle to democracy in Asia, he says, is not necessarily the cultural heritage of the region, but rather 'the resistance of authoritarian rulers and their apologists' (Kim, 1994, pp.189-94).

11.5 Conclusion

One of the main purposes of this chapter has been to emphasize the point that reference to 'cultural factors' in political contexts undoubtedly raises many more questions than it purports to answer. Certainly, it must be evident that 'culture' does not have nearly as much explanatory capability in terms of political practice and behaviour as some proponents of the 'Asian values' thesis might have us believe, and even this brief survey of 'culture and politics' in the Asia-Pacific region shows just how problematic any such attempt is. A critical approach to all these matters is therefore vital for developing a sophisticated understanding of how certain perspectives on culture are related to issues of political authority in the region, especially where the interests of political elites are at stake. As one

writer has noted, a close study of contemporary politics in the region shows that 'culture' has emerged not so much as the context within which political relations and diplomacy between countries are shaped, but rather as a weapon to be used within the context of political relations and diplomacy (Wright-Neville, 1995, p.3). This indicates that there is an unambiguously instrumental dimension to the very idea of culture in contemporary politics – a theme which emerged quite clearly in our survey of culture, nationalism and the state, as well as in relation to the 'Asian values' debate.

Although I have not spent much time elaborating on the related theme of culture and politics in 'the West', I hope that I have said enough to make it obvious that to take this as a coherent category or point of reference for precise political analysis may be as problematic as 'Asia', especially when the idea of 'the West' is used as an oppositional foil for the construction of a contrasting 'civilizational' entity such as 'Asia'. This is important as well when considering relations between all the countries who claim membership of the wider Asia-Pacific region – and who are indeed members of such regional organizations as the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) group. This group, and the wider geographic region itself, of course includes the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Although these countries and a large proportion of their inhabitants do share something in common that may be called 'cultural' because of their respective European-influenced heritage(s), they can hardly be lumped together as constituting a coherent 'Western' entity when it comes to a whole range of political, social, and economic issues and interests. One of the points in drawing attention to the 'Western side' is that the very same discourse tends to gloss over differences within the West as well, making the whole Asia/West dichotomy even more rigid. And apart from the fact that dichotomies are usually highly misleading, if not actually false, this type of thinking does not serve the cause of good political analysis. To accept the stereotypes and simplifications that are produced on both sides of the dichotomy with the aid of concepts such as 'culture' is to perpetuate the discourse of orientalism and all that it implies, as well as an equally problematic discourse of occidentalism.

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